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ABSTRACT

Although some research has been conducted in the past, few studies have investigated children's conceptions of life, death and dying. To study children's ideas about death, 112 children, age 4-18, were asked to draw what they thought of when they heard the word "death" and also to make verbal comments about their drawings. Three qualitatively different categories of themes or motives were discerned from the drawings. Category A depicted violence and external causes of death. The mean age of children in this category was 9.13 years. Category B described what happened to a person after death and often included Christian symbols and ceremonies. The average age of children in Category B was 12.74. Category C focused on the process of dying related to illness and old age. The average age of the children was 16.38. Overall, category differences were significantly related to age-levels. The findings suggest that these qualitative differences are a consequence of norms and values imposed on children from the adult world in order to meet adults' ideas concerning children about death. (Author/JAC)

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CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO THE WORD DEATH.

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Contribution to the American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting, New York, March 19-23, 1982.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

An important field of inquiry concerns children's conceptions of basic aspects of existence such as life, living, death and dying. Although some have focussed attention on this issue, we still do not know very much about the way children think about matters of this kind.
One of the first investigations was, as far as I know, a study by Schilder and Wechsler (1934) of children (5-15 years) undergoing psychiatric treatment. They studied the children's attitudes to death by asking them questions and showing them a number of specially selected pictures. Schilder and Wechsler found, among other things, that the children conceived of death as basically a question of deprivation, which was concretely illustrated by the fact that dead persons were unable to move.

Furthermore, they found that children think it is quite natural that other people die but do not consider their own death as something probable. They also found that the children believed that people died chiefly as a result of violence of some kind. In particular, the children believed that death occurred by dismembering. Thus, death was not conceived of as the natural termination and extinction of life, but was believed to be the consequence of violence. Schilder and Wechsler stress the point by saying: "Death by disease and old age have no reality for the child. It therefore does not fear to die, but does have a fear of being murdered." (p.449)

In Nagy's (1948) study of children's theories concerning the nature of death, she focussed her attention on children aged 3-10 years. Her data consisted of written compositions, drawings about death and discussions. It must, however, be pointed out that the method for assembling data was not completely consistent through the investigation, which may have given rise to analytical difficulties.

This reservation aside, the conclusions Nagy draws from the children's responses to the question of what death is, are that there exist three stages of development which are related to different age-levels.
In the first stage the child, generally less than 5 years of age, does not have a clear idea of what death is in the adult sense. The child attributes life and consciousness to the dead person, but this way of understanding the nature of death exists in two versions. Some children deny death because they believe that dead persons are asleep with closed eyes and immobile or that the dead person is alive somewhere else under changed circumstances. For instance, the dead persons are in heaven or in the grave, where they eat and breathe and are well aware of what is happening around them. They know if somebody is thinking about them.
Nagy hypothesizes that this way of viewing death reflects the child's separation anxiety.

According to other children (5-6 years of age) in this stage, the existence of death is no longer denied to the same extent, but it is accepted as a definitive and permanent fact. These children view death as a gradual process that takes time or believe that death is a temporary state that will come to an end after which life continues.

In general the children between 5 and 9 in Nagy's study believe that death is a person, either a special person, for instance a skeleton-man or a "reaper", or that death is identical to the dead person. The general idea of a personified death is found among children of different ages, but is most prominent among children between 5 to 9 years of age and constitutes the second stage. Furthermore, the child in this stage accepts the definitive and absolute character of death, which was not the case among the children in the first stage.
A child normally reaches the third of Nagy's stages after the age of 9, when he/she understands that in death the absence and cessation of life is the basic attribute, that is, when death is conceived of as a process which terminates life. When this is understood by a child the universal and irrevocable nature of death is also grasped.

In a longitudinal case-study conducted by Hug-Hellmuth (1967, originally published 1912), a little boy's conceptions of death as they were documented in a diary, were studied, resulting in findings similar to Nagy's first stage (above).
In the diary, the child's first idea of death appeared when, at the age of 3½ , he and his parents visited a cemetery. (The suddenness of the child's thought of death is, however, doubted by Hug-Hellmuth (p.502).) At this age the child thought that death was not a permanent and definitive state of being, but could be interrupted and terminated as sleep. Furthermore the idea that dead persons were not able to feel or think was not understood by the child.
When the boy was about 4-5 years, death meant an inability to run, eat, etc. and an ability to speak only very quietly (p.503).

Gartley and Bernasconi (1967) studied what ideas children ranging in age from 5½ to 14 years, had about death. They discussed the following questions with the children:

1. What happens when a person dies?
2. What does the corpse look like?
3. Does it hurt to die?
4. How do you know when someone is dead?
5. Can a dead person feel?

6. Do they stay in the coffin?
7. What do you understand of Heaven and Hell?
8. What does a person do in Heaven? In Hell?
9. Are you going to die someday? Why? When?
10. Is it right to kill? Why or why not?
11. Can dead people come back to life?

Two questions were added for the older children.

12. What are the causes of death?
13. Is it alright to kill in war?

The children were assigned to different groups (A-G) corresponding to their school level (primary to six). The result of the study shows that death, primarily in the youngest griup, is associated with lying down, immobility, not breathing and closed eyes. When the children were about 9 years (group D 8.5-9.8 years) they began to differentiate between body and soul in their answers. After 10 years of age (group G 10.10-14) the children's ways of reasoning were considered more mature and similar to the adults'. At this age, that is, about 10 years, the children mostly associated the way people died with violence of different kinds. This tendency decreased when the child got older and was not common to the same extent in the oldest group where the children were about 14 years.
A finding which runs counter to earlier ones was (Nagy, 1948) that all of the children were aware that they could all die, although the youngest children considered this a very remote event (group A and B). The possibility of dying in the present was first recognized by children around 8 years (group C 7.5-8.4). In this study all the children believed in the finality of death. This can be compared to the results of Nagy's (1948) study, in which one finding was that it is only after 9 years of age that children understand that death is a definitive and universal phenomenon.

In order to test whether the understanding of the universality and irrevocability of death is age-dependent, Childers and Wimmer (1971) carried out an investigation of 75 children ranging in age from 4 to 10 years. They were asked to answer questions about death but also either to write or to draw what death meant to them. The results very clearly support the idea that children's understanding of the universality of death is age-related. It was shown that most children of 9 years and above accept the universality of death and the author's conclusion is that there is established a "cognitive point" for understanding at this age. The irreversible nature of death was not completely understood by the children in this study. The majority of the children were either negative or clearly uncertain on this question and it was not possible to discern any age-related differences here.

In a study by Koocher (1973, 1974) 75 children ranging in age from 6 to 15 years were studied within a Piagetian theoretical framework. Four basic questions were put to the children:

1. What makes things die?
2. How do you make dead things come back to life?
3. When will you die?
4. What will happen then?

The children were assigned into three groups according to their level of cognitive functioning. Their answers to the four questions were rated by independent judges.
The result indicates a very clear relation between way of answering and level of cognitive development. For instance, it was only children found to be pre-operational (2-7 years) in the Piagetian sense who believed that dead persons could be brought back to life again. Older children understood that death is permanent and irrevocable. Contrary to Nagy's (1948) findings there were no traces of personification of death in the replies of the children in Koocher's study, which he assumes indicate a socio-cultural difference since Nagy studied Hungarian children.

A more recent study of children's thinking of death and its relation to personal experience has been carried out by Kane (1979). In her study 122 children aged 3 through 12 participated as subjects and were divided into two groups, based on whether or not they had had some personal experience of death.
From previous investigations done in this field nine components were derived. The components were: Realization (including Personification), Separation, Immobility, Irrevocability, Causality, Dysfunctionality, Universality, Intensivity, and Appearance. The general idea of the study, was to determine which of the components the children held at different age-levels. Kane found that the children's concept of death developed in three stages, which may be described as the gradual incorporation and integration of the above mentioned components into a unified concept.

In the first stage (3-5 years) the concept of death primarily consisted of the components Realization, Separation and Immobility, which paralleled each other without forming a unity. Furthermore, the children thought of death as something magical in the sense that they believed that they by merely saying and wishing someone's death, it would actually happen. The children also seemed to identify death as identical to "looking like dead", that is lying down immobile with closed eyes.
In the second stage (5-8 years) death means a further development of the

previously held components Realization, Separation and Immobility and addition of the remaining six components. In this stage the children hold all the nine components but they do not interrelate them into a more complex and holistic concept.

In the beginning of Stage 2 the children believed that death was caused by external causes like violence. Later on in this stage they understood that death could be the consequence of corporeal dysfunction and internal factors. A common belief is that, except in the case of violence, death is associated with old age and is a very remote event. In the beginning of Stage 2 the children say that dead persons cannot speak or eat. Later on they realize that dead persons cannot drink or hear and that when you are dead you cannot freeze or smell flowers. Still older children understand that dead persons cannot dream or know that they are dead.

In Stage 3 (from 8 years) the children interrelate the components into a whole, forming an abstract concept of the components. The children in this stage are thus capable of thinking abstractly of death and of applying, for instance, existential aspects on life and death. Death is considered to be a state of internal dysfunction and is considered to be a definition of a state. The children's conceptions in this stage therefore are similar to adults'.

In comparison with Nagy's results there is very litte reification or personification found in Kane's results. She also found that children of 3 years held some kind of concept of death, although incomplete and fragmentary. When answers from the experienced and inexperienced children were analyzed the experienced children aged 3-6 held a significantly larger number of components than their inexperienced comrades at the same age. This difference disappeared for children older than 7 years.

The normal procedure when investigating children's ideas about death and dying is to interview the children, but as Weininger (1979) points out, relying on children's answers may turn out to be a troublesome and unreliable source of information. The reason is that a child may say things that indicate that it has a clear understanding of what it is all about, but these may later on be found to be unreflected quotations from parents and other adults. In order to control for this kind of premature use of concepts and expressions, Weininger studied the way 60 children played with dolls which were supposed to be seriously ill or dead. He also asked four questions taken from Koocher (1973, 1974) mentioned above.

The findings of Weininger's study indicated that the accuracy of the way the children understood the concepts of death and dying increased with age. An important finding was that there were inconsistencies in the relationship

between the children's play and the way they expressed themselves verbally. The play was sometimes indicative of a more developed understanding than was found in the answers of the children. Weininger concludes that it is not until the age of 8 or 9 that the content of the play and the verbally expressed ideas will be consistent with each other.

The aim of the present study is to study children's ideas about death. A basic idea is that of letting the responding child be as free as possible to choose the content in his responses, implying that the researcher should not define in advance in what terms the answer should be made or into what pre-specified response-classes or categories the responses should be classified. Instead it is the children themselves who choose the content of their answers. The children in this study were therefore asked to draw what they came to think of when they heard the word death and subsequently to comment in writing on their drawings.

METHOD

The subjects

The 112 children participating in the study were recruited locally from four different levels of the educational system. Of these, 23 children came from pre-school, 20 from grade 2, 26 from grade 5, and 43 from the last two years of secondary school. The children's mean age was 12.29 years (s=4.47) and their ages ranged from 4-18.

The collection of data

The research leader met the children in their school environment and spent some time there in order to become more acquainted to the children before asking them to participate in the study. Half a day was spent with pupils from the secondary school level while a whole day was spent with the younger children. When a suitable occasion arose, the research leader asked the children to make a drawing of what they came to think of when they heard the word death and, after they had finished the drawing, to comment on it in writing. The children in the youngest group, who did not know how to write, were aided by their normal teacher and by the research leader in writing about what the drawing meant. It was hypothesised that the combination of drawings and written commentaries would enlarge the database for the interpretation of the content and increase the validity of the study.

The analysis

The aim of the analysis was to interpret the content of the drawings and their verbal commentaries, (the drawings and the written commentaries are referred to solely as the drawings in what follows), in order to discern qualitative

differences. The most important question therefore was: Are there any differences between the drawings in what they are about?
The analytical procedure essentially involves a person (a judge) studying each drawing intensively several times in order to become as familiar with its content as possible. Furthermore, the content of each drawing has to be related to the content of every other drawing.

A reason for this is that a thorough acquaintance with the content of every drawing is necessary if the judge is to have the opportunity of getting a clear impression of the total range of the qualitative variation in content in the material. A second reason is that increased familiarity with the content of each drawing enhances the judge's sensitivity to qualitative differences within and between the drawings. As a consequence of this, qualitative features which were initially invisible will be discerned in each drawing, as the judge gets more acquainted with the material. The mechanism behind this is that the judge, by increasing his knowledge of a single drawing, can ignore information which at the beginning of the analysis was essential if he was to understand and remember the drawing. Information on this level will gradually become familiar and then be seen as relatively trivial while the judge focusses attention on information on another level which brings to the fore new and previously unnoticed aspects.

Drawings having similar qualitative features constitute a category, which is delimited from other categories by its internal qualities and by its qualitative divergence from these other categories.

The categories are thus superordinate descriptions of those qualitative similarities and differences that appear as a result of the judge's familiarity with the drawings, and do not exist à priori. What qualitative differences will emerge during the analysis and accordingly also what categories will be formed must be seen as arbitrary. They must, however, fulfill the criterion of being plausible descriptions of the content of the drawings and are therefore subject to evaluation by independent judges.

RESULT

When each drawing had been scrutinized a large number of times three qualitatively different kinds of themes or motives were discerned and found to completely cover the total number of drawings.

These three themes form the base of three qualitatively different categories which are described in detail below. Thus, each category represents a certain outcome, which in each case includes a large variation in the way basic theme is expressed by each child but which reflects the children's reactions to the word death.

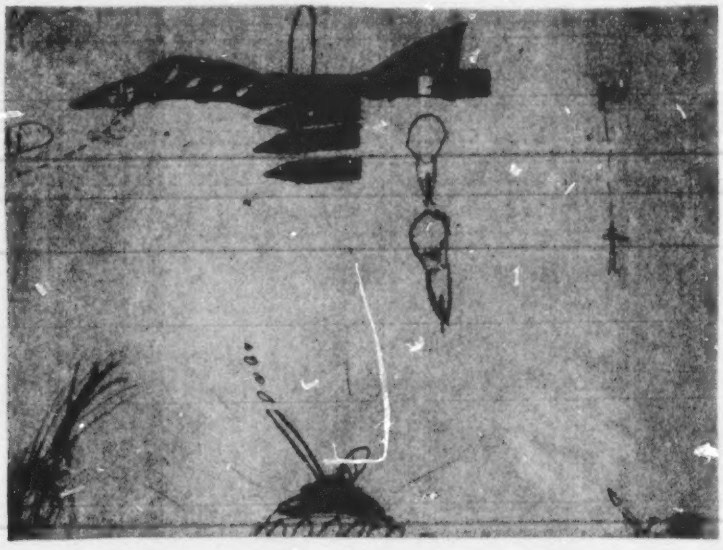
It is important, however, to note that the existence of one specific theme does not exclude the presence of another. On the contrary, there is usually more than one theme discernible in a drawing, making it possible to classify the content in more than one way. The basic rule, then, is that the dominating theme has been decisive in categorization.

Category A

The drawings constituting this category are about violent actions of various kinds. The content of the drawings varies widely within their specific topic, but in spite of this it is always related to physical violence, war, criminality, accidents, etc.. The drawings show soldiers fighting, aeroplanes bombing in wars, bank-robbers being pursued by the police, gunfire, homicides and suicides, burning houses and so on. In all the drawings in this category the dominating theme is various external causes to death.

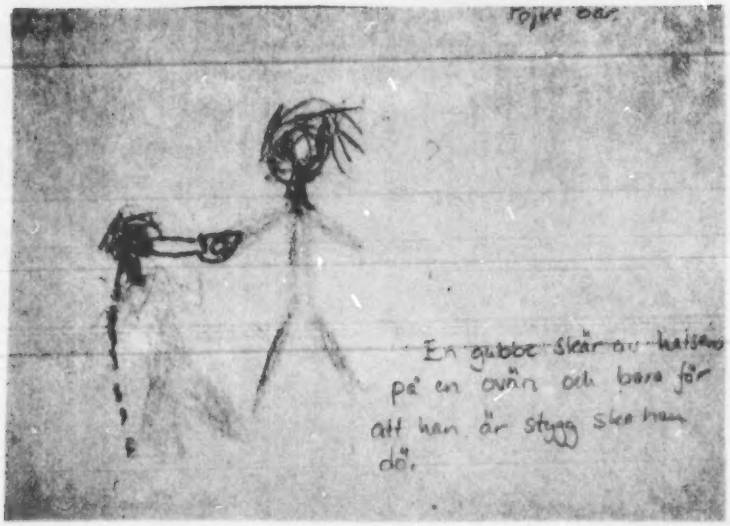
A few drawings are presented below in order to illustrate the nature of Category A. The child's verbal commentary concerning the drawing is placed under the drawing.

Figure 1.



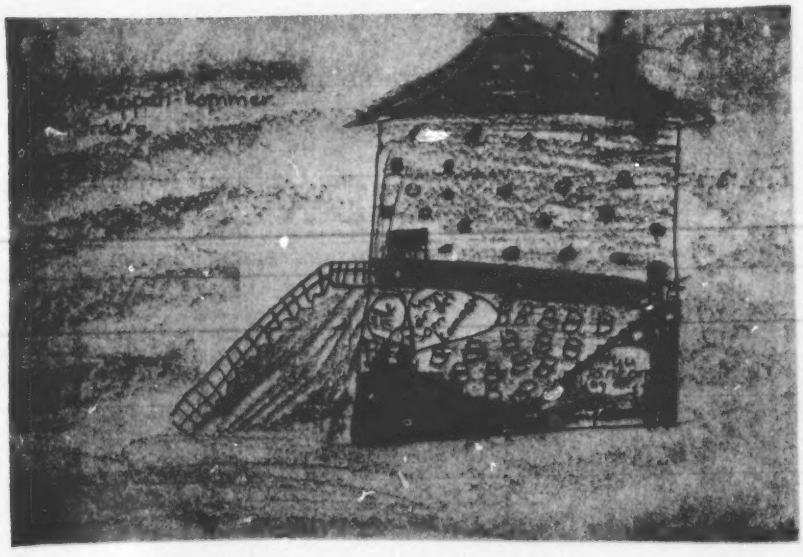
It's war now

Figure 2.



An old man cuts the throat of an enemy.
Just because he is a bad man, he(the enemy) will die.

Figure 3.



A family that is afraid and down the stairs comes a murderer

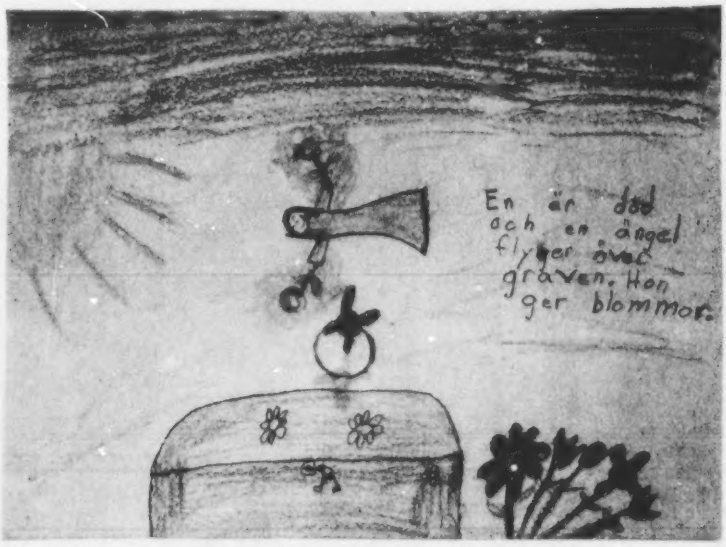
Category B

This category consists of drawings whose content is concerned with conventional symbols and ceremonies connected with death as an event which has already taken place. Frequently the children draw Christian symbols and phenomena such as God, angels, paradise, the devil, crosses, gravestones, churches, churchyards, and so on. But other topics are also represented in the drawings, which are not necessarily to be interpreted as Christian symbols. Symbols of this kind are the reaper, skeletons, skulls, graves and coffins. A description which embraces

all of the drawings making up this category would be that they are concerned with what happens to a person after he has died.

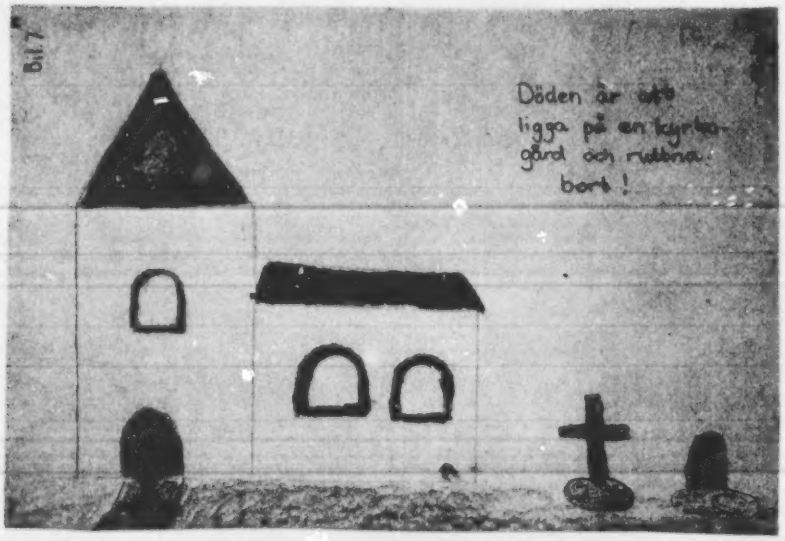
The children's ideas about what happens to a person after he has died, as it is reflected on in the drawings, is very realistic and indicates a good knowledge of the procedures that follow a death. Where their theme is the state of being after death, it is, with a few exceptions, transformed into the Christian religious belief of a life after death. Below three drawings exemplify the content of Category B.

Figure 4.



Someone is dead and an angel flies over the grave. She gives flowers.

Figure 5.



Death is to lie in a churchyard and rot away.

Figure 6.

God is the right way. When you have died the wide path to the Kingdom of Heaven will be open. There stands God, waiting for you.

Category C

In this category the drawings have a more heterogeneous character than the drawings constituting the two previous categories. The most important characteristic is that the drawings very often contain reflections and thoughts about death and the process of dying. Death may appear in the future and sometimes it is the artist's own death that is depicted. The content of the drawings is therefore, usually linked to thoughts about the experience or sensation of dying.

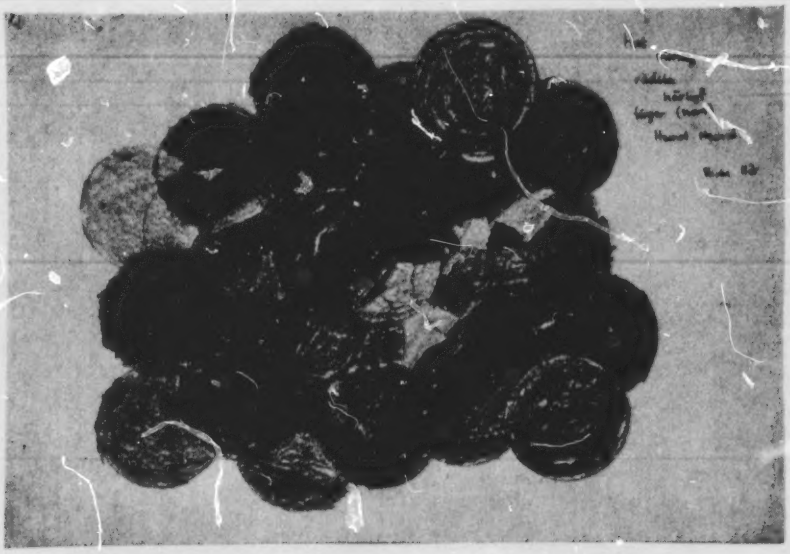
Another theme concerns illness, aging and loneliness in relation to death as a phenomenon. There are no signs of violence in this category: instead it is possible to trace social or emotional involvement.

The content of the drawings forming Category C may be summarized as comprising attempts to express death and dying as phenomena of existence and focussing the process of dying. The content of the category is exemplified below by three drawings.

Figure 7.

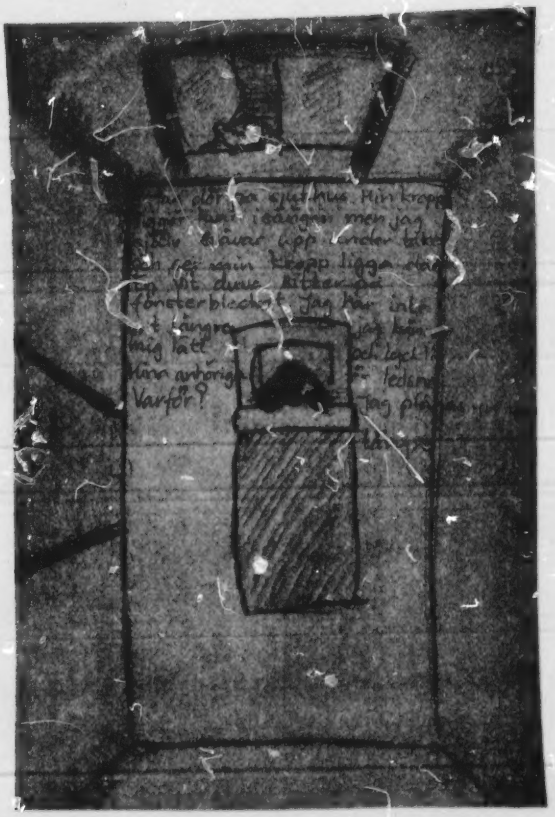
As I see it, death is a grey lifeless wall and then a big black hole, down which you just fall and fall. But right at the end there is a yellow light, and what there is behind that I don t know.

Figure 8.



Hate, darkness, fear,
wonderful,
colours, (dark),
Terrible, terrible.

Figure 9.



I am dying in a hospital. My body rests in a bed, while I myself am floating around under the ceiling and see my body laying there. A white dove sits on the windowsill. I have no pain any more and I feel happy and at ease. My relatives are feeling sorrow. Why? I'm not suffering any longer.

The three categories represent quite different responses to the word death among the children. Furthermore, it was found that the three categories are related to different age levels.

Drawings based on physical violence, war, accidents, and other external causes to death, which constitute category A, were in general produced by the youngest children. Category B, containing drawings centering on angels, churches, God, skulls, etc. and thus directed towards the situation after death, was the product of children whose ages were close to the average age of the population of the study. Those drawings constituting Category C were usually made by the oldest children.

The relation between the categories and the mean age of the children is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

	CATEGORY A	B	C
n	30	66	16
$\bar{x}$	9.13	12.74	16.38
s	4.14	4.05	2.22

The observed difference in mean age between the categories is statistically significant (t_{A-B}=4.225, df=94, p<.005; t_{B-C}=3.366, df=80, p<.001; t_{A-C}=6.035, df=44, p<.0005).

Interjudge reliability

In order to ascertain the extent to which the categories found were reliable descriptions of the content of the drawings, an independent judge was asked to classify the drawings into the three categories. The judge was unaware of the results of the qualitative analysis and had not seen the drawings prior to the categorization task. The judge was supplied with written instructions which included a description that pointed out in a general way the qualitative differences found and the characteristics of the different categories. The judge's task was to categorize the drawings into the three categories.

One way of assessing reliability is to consider interjudge agreement as a standard. In this case, interjudge agreement, expressed as the proportion of categorizations the two judges agreed upon, was .91. This means that the two judges disagreed in 10 cases of 112.

It has been argued that this method of assessing reliability lacks precision because it does not take into consideration to what extent agreement is based on chance. By applying Cohen's (1960) method for assessing interjudge agreement the impact of chance is excluded, resulting in a coefficient of agreement of .85.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of what the children had drawn as a reaction to the word death makes clearly visible some qualitatively different lines of thought represented in the drawings. These thoughts were subsequently condensed into three categories of description.

Category A contains drawings in which the children depict violence in various ways. The motives are war, murder, accidents, robbery, fire,etc.. The contents of the drawings are all about external causes to death. The time perspective adopted in all the drawings is confined to the time before death has occurred. The mean age of the children whose drawings constituted this category was 9.13 years.

In Category B, all the drawings are describing what happens to a person after he has died. Very often these drawings show Christian symbols and ceremonies like crosses, churches, funerals, angels, God and paradise. The drawings also contain graves, skulls and skeletons, which are more general features connected with death. The average age of the children in this category was 12.74 years.

Finally, in Category C, the drawings concern the process of dying, which is related to illness, suffering or old age. Several drawings visualize what happens to a person when he dies, that is, the children try to catch the sensation of dying in their drawings. Very often these drawings are non-figurative and some are accompanied by poetic verbal commentaries. The time perspective focusses upon the moment of dying. The average age of the children in this category was 16.38 years.

From one point of view the drawings can be seen as a kind of projective test, giving the researcher some insight into the way each child conceives of death. From another point of view, the children's reactions may be related to a development perspective. Applying this latter perspective the categories could be interpreted as consequences of the children s cognitive development, indicating a qualitative change from a concrete level of reasoning to a formal operational level (Piaget, 1968). The contents of Categories A and B then represent different forms of concrete thinking, while the content of Category C reflects the children's ability to operate on an abstract level.

The children's reactions in this study fit rather well with Piaget's stages of development. Nonetheless, without denying or depreciating the existence of cognitive development in the Piagetian sense, I would like to express the idea that other factors may be equally or even more important for a specific result of the kind that is presented in this paper.

Of course a child's thinking develops as it grows older, making it more capable of dealing with tasks which are increasingly more complex intellectually and abstract. This fact, however, hardly explains the specific content of the child's thought; that is, it does not explain what each child associates with when he/she hears the word death. Instead it seems important to devote more attention to the socio-cultural environment that surrounds the children. The most important question then concerns the relation between the content of the socio-cultural environment and the content of the child's thoughts.

In order to illustrate what this argument means in concrete terms we can examine the outcome of this study and relate it to the children's socio-cultural environment.

Category A was found to be a product of the youngest children's associations of death with physical violence, war, murder, and similar phenomena. This theme seems to be natural for children at this age and has previously been reported several times. (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967; Kane, 1979; Koocher, 1973,1974; Weininger, 1979.) One conclusion in the Schilder & Wechsler (1934) study is that the children very easily form the connotation death as a result of violence (p.422). They suggest that it is much easier for a child to understand death as a result of violence than death as a result of e.g. illness, because of the child's own aggressiveness. (p.428) It is worth pointing out that the children in this study were psychiatrically disturbed children with damaging childhood experiences behind them, which may explain their aggressiveness, and thus, emphasize the impact of the children's socio-cultural surrounding on their conception of death. This point receives further support when Schilder & Wechsler speak about children's ideas about hell. They say: "The child's idea of hell reflects in part the attitudes of the adults about him whose ideas on the subject are usually very childish."(p.428)

Speculating further about plausible explanations for these observations and for the outcome represented in Category A, it seems reasonable to assume that death is connected with a series of negative attributes, one of which is that of separation anxiety (Nagy, 1948; Spinetta, 1974). Furthermore, it is probably very rare for adults to discuss death at any length with children of this age. Instead they may do their best to keep a child out of such discussions in order to protect it. The result of this may be to exclude the child from realistic information and thus leave him to create his own version of the nature of death out of his own imagination and knowledge of the world. The alternative sources of information may be peers, comics, books, radio and TV. It has been suggested that TV may have a strong effect on the formation of the child's conceptions in matters of this kind (Gartley & Bernasconi, 1967). Sources of

information of this kind, therefore, may give the child the impression that death is the consequence of external violent causes. When the child hears the word death, it will react negatively by associating the word with something which is ugly and arouses fear, such as war, physical violence, accidents, etc..

Thus, it is assumed that up to about 9 years of age children have not had much contact with aspects of death other than those which are related to external causes of the kind described in Category A.

The drawings constituting Category B contain Christian symbols, graves, skeletons, and so on. The average age of the children in this category is 12.74 years, which means that they normally have been to school for 5-6 years. In school they have been exposed to teaching whose aim is to transmit the socio-cultural heritage of the society, that is, its norms, beliefs, values, etc.. Among other things conveyed is that the church is normally the institution which is responsible for the care of dead persons. Furthermore, the children have internalized Christian ideas of, for instance, a life after death with God in paradise.

As I see it, the drawings provide concrete evidence that the children have internalized a socio-culturally dependent way of thinking which many citizens in a society regard as desirable.

In Category C, the drawings are very often non-figurative, treating death as a phenomenon or sensation and implying philosophical considerations about death and the individual's personal relationship to death. From one point of view, the content of this category is a direct consequence of the children's ability to operate at an abstract level.

At the same time it must be remembered that adults with whom the child is in contact prefer and are content to acknowledge one given form and content in the child's thoughts rather than another. At this age-level (around 16 years) philosophical and existential issues are normally discussed and these young people are normally well aware of the possibility of their own immediate death.

Within the specific socio-cultural circumstances in which a child lives, there is therefore always a particular way of viewing the world and of behaving that is evaluated positively within that setting. Although temporary divergences may be tolerated, they are not accepted for long by the child's environment before there is a reaction intended to correct the divergence into something acceptable. Concretely this means that a 16 year old child cannot reason in the same way a 5 year old child does without being subject to correction.

In spite of this, temporary divergences are common, which are illustrated by the age variation in each of the three categories.

I therefore maintain that the socio-cultural environment of which a child is a part supplies specific rules as to how the child should think and a specific content determining what a child should think. What I mean by this is that the way a child describes the world and the attributes it ascribes to that world, must be a function of those conceptions and thoughts which are available to the child.

More specifically I believe that adults' ideas about what it is to be a child of a certain age have a direct impact on how and what a child thinks.

This point can be fully elaborated by using the concept of animism as an example. Generally speaking, there are very few persons who would think it odd that an adult should behave differently to a person aged 5 and to a person aged 50. Basically, these different ways of behaving are consequences of the adult's ideas of what it means to be 5 years old and what it means to be 50.

A conception of this kind made it reasonable for Piaget (1929) to ask children questions like: "Can the clouds do as they like? Can the moon do what it wants? Can rivers do as they like?". If they had been put to an adult, such questions would certainly have occasioned surprise and have been considered as absurd or as evidence that the questioner was mentally unbalanced. It is, however, acceptable to ask children questions of this kind, and this must be interpreted as a concrete sign of the adult's conception of the way children think about the world.

The children's answers to this kind of questions made Piaget (1929) discover a way of functioning which he called animism. Piaget considers animistic thinking as a very basic form of thinking. He says:

> *In short, however cautiously one proceeds and whatever pains one takes to avoid interpreting the children's answers too literally, it remains an undoubted fact that child thought starts with the idea of a universal life as its primary assumption. From this point of view, animism is in no sense the product of a structure built up by the child's reflection but is a primitive principle and it is only by a series of progressive differentiations that inert matter comes to be distinguished from that which is living. In this light, activity and passivity, spontaneous and acquired movement, are bracketed ideas that become gradually detached by thought from the primitive continuum in which all is regarded as living. (Piaget, 1929, p. 230)*

In opposition to this, I would argue that it is adults' conceptions of the way children reason about life and death that form the children's thinking and reasoning about those phenomena. It would be very strange if the world as it is presented by children's books of different kinds, comics, children's programs on radio, TV, and in the theatre, by peers and adults etc., would have no effect on the way children perceive the world around them. Thus, in the children's immediate socio-cultural environment, there exists an abundance of information that directly implies the presence of spiritual life and cognition in vegetable and animal forms (cf Walt Disney's Donald Duck). Figure 10 below, which is taken from a well-known Swedish book for children, is an example of the widespread depiction of vegetables with assumed human characteristics for children at certain ages. The picture shows how all the plants in the garden arranged a party and enjoyed themselves.

Figure 10.

From Beskow, 1960, p.7.

Animistic descriptions of this kind are very often the result of conscious efforts to adapt the information to what is believed to be the child's way of thinking and are thus symptoms of the socio-cultural milieu in which a child lives. Piaget (1929) also discusses the impact of the environment on the children's animistic thinking by saying that adults' use of language is sometimes animistic. This must influence the child Piaget says, but

> *... it is obvious that in all these cases, language is not the cause of child animism in general. It is simply the cause of animism following one particular line - already determined - rather than another. There is simply, ..., convergence between the regressive tendencies of language*

and the child's natural trend of mind. It is not the child which is moulded by language; it is the language which is already childish. (Piaget, 1929. p. 249).

According to Piaget, the impact of the adults' language on a child's way of understanding the world is marginal in relation to the effect of the process of development. I believe, on the contrary, that the socio-cultural environment (including language) is of enormous importance for the child's conceptions of the world, and I believe too that the content of the drawings in this study are reflecting environmental influences on the children's thinking.

As a concluding remark I would like to suggest it is timely to support and encourage research investigating adults' ideas about children, as a complement to research solely focussing on children. The relationship between adults' conceptions of children and the children's ideas about the world is far from being clarified, and it is important that it should be.

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